DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 996 CS 206 717

AUTHOR Robertson, Linda R.
TITLE Stranger in a Strange Land, or Stimulating Faculty Interest in Writing Across the Curriculum.
PUB DATE Jul 81
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Wyoming Conference on Freshman and Sophomore English (10th, Laramie, WY, July 6-10, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Change; Change Strategies; *Cooperation; Faculty Development; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Participation; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Motivation; *Teacher Role; Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Writing across the Curriculum

ABSTRACT

All writing-across-the-curriculum programs have one common feature: they require that composition faculty approach and enlist the cooperation of faculty in other disciplines. To help in this regard, the following recommendations have been made to writing faculty directing interdisciplinary programs: (1) survey the faculty, either through the objective survey or interview methods, to note the faculty members' conceptions of how writing connects with thinking and learning; (2) legitimize one's ideas by using outside consultants--outside "authority" figures impress on faculty the validity of what one intends to do with one's writing program; (3) lift the veil of secrecy surrounding one's function as a writing instructor through techniques such as the use of referral slips to inform faculty of times their students seek assistance on writing projects and to note what faculty can do to assist in student writing improvement; and (4) seek advice from the faculty, since establishing a faculty advisory committee on writing in the curriculum is an effective tactic that gets selected faculty members more involved in writing-across-the-curriculum programs. (RL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED211996

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Linda R. Robertson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

Stranger in a Strange Land, or
Stimulating Faculty Interest in Writing Across the Curriculum

Linda R. Robertson

A song by Marlene Dietrich, rather than Heinlein's novel by the same name, inspired the title of this essay. Hers is the melancholic lament of a stranger in an alien land. If you fail to understand why such a title is appropriate to a discussion of implementing a writing-across-the-curriculum program, you either have not begun such a program at your institution or you hold a tenured position at the Thomas More Utopian University of Sweet Reason and Grace.

I once saw a film on the behavior of macaque monkeys living on the subcontinent of India. As troop animals, macaques have three characteristics relevant to a discussion of enlisting faculty support for writing-across-the-curriculum: they are territorial, they have an hierarchical society, and they are a bit suspicious of macaques who are not members of their troop. A macaque's security and identity lies in the troop. A strange macaque cannot just swing into a troop of macaques and expect to be invited to dinner.

CS206717

When a strange macaque enters the territory of a macaque troop, certain protocols are observed. The newcomer sits at the troop's territorial perimeter staring at the troop. For some time, there is a lot of staring and scratching, but the most important protocol is the handshake. A member of the troop will extend a hand to the stranger. The stranger will grasp his in return. If the handshake is properly received and returned, the new macaque can stay to dinner, enter the hierarchy, and maybe get tenure after six years.

All writing-across-the-curriculum programs have one feature in common: they require that composition faculty approach faculty in other disciplines. Anyone planning a writing-across-the-curriculum program is the stranger seeking a handshake from the troop. If you are the new macaque on the block in your particular corner of the jungle, I recommend--as one vine swinger to another--that you identify your motives as peaceful by making the appropriate friendly gestures.

Before you try introducing yourself into the troop, you will want to have your own goals well defined for yourself. You will want to know what kind of program you want and what specific structures you will need to implement it. To illustrate, let me digress long enough to describe our program. In 1978 the University of Oregon Honors College, which enrolls about 300 students, decided to implement a writing-across-the-curriculum program. The Honors College is among only about a dozen such programs in the nation which offer a comprehensive, four-year course of study to students of advanced ability and motivation. Students enrolled in the Honors College

substitute Honors College courses for the university's general education requirements, completing six core courses. In addition, students take two upper-division colloquia in courses outside their majors, and complete either a senior thesis or project. About 1/3 of Honors College courses are taught by the three resident faculty; the remainder are taught by departmental faculty.

In implementing a writing-across-the-curriculum program, our primary aim has been to develop faculty awareness of the inseparability of thinking and writing. Since 1978, we have worked informally with the faculty--primarily those teaching the freshman history and literature courses. We have had a support system for the faculty, consisting of at least one composition adviser who works with students either referred by faculty or who come on their own for assistance. We are now entering the second stage of our program, broadening our reach to faculty through formal workshops and seeking thorough curricular reform.

As I said, knowing what it is you want to achieve necessarily precedes approaching the faculty to discuss implementing a writing-across-the-curriculum program.

Once you have a sense of your own goals, you are ready to approach the faculty. Any strategy, gesture, or protocol you use should be guided by the desire to establish the kind of contact with the faculty that lets them assess you and understand that your pruposes are not alien to their own. You want them to extend you a hand; but before they will, they need time for scratching and staring. The appropriate

gestures, then, are those which indicate you are aware of territorial markers, are cognizant of the existing hierarchy, and can be identified as one of the troop.

Identifying Territorial Boundaries: The Faculty Attitudinal Survey

You will want to know where are the territorial boundaries or you will blunder into them all unknowing. One way to identify these boundaries is through a faculty attitudinal survey. Of these, there are two possible kinds: the objective survey and the interview. Which you choose depends upon the size of the faculty you wish to survey and on the degree of personal contact you seek to have with the faculty.

An objective survey has been developed by NCTE, and I have seen a modification of it developed by Elaine Maimon at Beaver College(Pennsylvania). It is several pages long and would be useful in either its present or slightly shortened form for gaining a sense of classroom practices and the faculty's evaluation of the effectiveness of the composition program. An interview survey takes longer but allows for more interchange between you and the faculty. It allows for the discovery of faculty attitudes which otherwise might not be elicited and has the advantage of letting you talk informally with the faculty about writing. Such informal contact provides a comfortable context for faculty to engage in what may be their first serious consideration of writing as a pedagogical issue.

While there may be standard interview questions for this type of survey, I am not aware of them; at any rate, it seems sensible that

interview questions should address what you particularly want to learn from your faculty and yet be open-ended enough to allow faculty members to explore the implications of the questions and introduce matters you may not have thought to cover in the survey. I needed to survey about 40 faculty members and asked three broad questions:1) What is your evaluation of the HC writing program? 2)Does the program serve your needs? and 3)How do you evaluate the writing abilities of HC students?

I discovered that many faculty already see a connection between intellectual ability and written expression--between thinking and writing--but it is a negative connection. Some assume that if an essay is badly written, the student is not very bright. Some faculty said students perversely wrote reports even though they had been assigned an analysis and opined this was because the HC had admitted a "bad batch" of freshmen, that too many of them were simply not sufficiently analytical, as indicated by the large number of business and pre-med majors. I might mention that entering HC students average combined SATs of 1250, and their cumulative high school GPAs cluster at 3.6 to 3.8 or higher.

In addition to linking writing and thinking in a negative way, some faculty also separate writing from thinking or analytical abilities, defining writing as having to do with errors in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and paragraphing. Some faculty said they thought their students' writing was fine, or even exceptional, while at the same time complaining their students wrote boring, unimaginative

prose and did not seem engaged with their material.

Given their narrow definition of writing, it is not surprising that most faculty misperceive the function of writing specialists, assuming they deal exclusively with grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Many resented the suggestion that a writingg specialist might be concerned with invention, logic, and argumentation, because these have to do with "thinking", which is the exclusive concern of the faculty member teaching a given course.

You can probably guess the other kinds of responses the faculty made to the interview survey. Some faculty seem to have anxieties about their own writing abilities. When asked how he assessed the writing abilities of HC students, one faculty member said he lacked confidence in his own ability to correct mechanical errors and so perhaps was not the best person to evaluate student writing. While this kind of anxiety is an extreme case--or maybe only the honesty about it is—the reservation is symptommatic of an anxiety about writing felt by more than one faculty member. At the heart of the matter, many seem to feel that if the student's writing is inadequate, either the student is just not too bright, or the faculty member is a poor teacher. No one who has taken teaching as the way to put bread on the table can in the privacy of his or her own conscience honestly maintain for long that students are just intellectually deficient; therefore, asking faculty to think about student writing means you are touching on anxieties about how they measure up as teachers.

These responses mark faculty territory. Faculty find student prose dull, unimaginative, boring, and uncritical and do not see how a writing specialist can help address these problems. Perhaps you can see why it would be unwise to swing into the middle of this troop carrying the message of writing-across-the-curriculum. You might be perceived as intending to tell the troops how to conduct their classes and suggesting that faculty are poor teachers, in which case the troop would almost certainly not offer to shake your hand. For this reason, it is important to understand faculty attitudes toward student writing abilities before you attempt to launch a writing-across-the-curriculum program.

Up the Hierarchy: Outside Consultants

The adage "A prophet is not heard in his own land" is probably true of prophets in general; it is particularly true of those advocating reform in composition programs. One reason for this is that composition specialists tend to be junior faculty. And hierarchical considerations are essential to the identity of any troop. It is not easy for junior faculty to establish credibility with senior faculty.Another reason composition faculty have difficulty gaining the ears of their colleagues is that composition is not recognized as a scholarly field. Composition courses are generally "grunt" courses taught by infantry privates, the graduate students. Rhetoric is a respected field if it is identified with speech or communication departments, but not—or not yet—when identified with writing.

Failure to attend to the problem of hierarchy can make you a

Jeremiah in the wilderness. The solution is to legitimize your function by calling in other prophets who agree with you.Grants for outside writing consultants have been awarded, for instance, by NEH and the Carneigie-Mellon Foundation, to name two of the more prominent granting agencies. Obviously, consultants sponsored by prestigious endowments can help greatly in legitimizing your ideas.

If you are not in a position to seek a grant or feel the lead-time is too long, remember anyone you bring from another college or university will be regarded as a consultant by your faculty. I invited my colleague Susan Hubbuch to speak to our faculty on the workshops she had given at Lewis&Clark College(Portland), which is about 110 miles north of us. I did not introduce her as "my friend from graduate school who has the same background, experience, and ideas as I." I introduced her as "Dr. Hubbuch, who established the Lewis&Clark Writing Skills Center with a grant from the Collins Foundation." She explained in a forthright and entertaining manner the usefulness and importance of faculty workshops. After her presentation, several faculty asked me when we could begin faculty workshops.

In addition to legitimizing your ideas, outside consultants can help alter faculty attitudes. If the consultant describes the faculty at other institutions as being recalcitrant about implementing writing-across-the-curriculum programs, your faculty--who will regard this other, strange troop as Yahoos--will assume they themselves could not possibly be so unenlightened.

We at the Honors College decided to formalize the benefits of outside consultants. In 1979, we initiated the formation of the Pacific Northwest Writing Consortium, which consists of six colleges and universities in the Pacfic Northwest, each of which has a writing-across-the-curriculum program. We agreed to serve as consultants to one another, and in winter, 1980, we began publication of a bi-monthly newsletter.

The newsletter contains reports on programs, descriptions of curricular materials, book reviews, and information about current research and conferences. Just recently, we have begun receiving submissions from other other colleges and universities which are not members of The Pacific Northwest Writing Consortium but which have an interest in writing-across-the-curriculum. The newsletter is sent to institutions throughout the country as well as to Consortium members. Naturally, the newsletter is circulated to faculty on our campuses to increase their awareness of the issues pertaining to rhetorical theory and pedagogy.

Other institutions have preceded us in publishing informative newsletters, among them the lively fforum produced at the University of Michigan. We found it to be an inexpensive way to legitimize writing-across-the-curriculum(each member contributed $25 towards copying and mailing charges for the first year's issues).

In July, 1981, the Consortium was awarded $380,000 by NEH for a three year project to develop writing-across-the-curriculum programs in our region. We believe ours is the first to provide such a regional

organization.

While every effort to bring outside consultants to a campus or to create a supportive network of consultants will not result in a grant proposal, the underlying need is probably the same for all institutions seeking to alert faculty to the importance of writing-across-the-curriculum. Outside consultants and "networking" help indicate the legitimacy of writing-across-the-curriculum.

Speaking Macaque to Macaque: Revealing Your Function

There is a veil of secrecy surrounding the teaching of composition. Whether you teach composition courses or run a writing-skills center, few faculty have a clear sense of what you do to help students express themselves better. All they know is that you do something to help their students. Or in some cases, they feel you are not doing anything to help their students, that the students who pass your courses still "can't write." It is important, then, to lift the veil of secrecy from your function.

As the composition adviser, I have a convenient way to inform faculty of my function, one which might be adaptable to a writing skills center. I give the faculty referral slips on which they can indicate if they wish to know whether the student came to see me. If they do, I send them a copy of the log sheet I keep of each session. The log sheet indicates what problem I have diagnosed as central to the deficiency of the paper, what assistance I have given to the student,

and whether I recommend a follow-up session.

There are other ways to make your function clear. One is to circulate to the faculty examples of the kind of assistance or instruction you give students. Write down your most effective techniques--on paragraphing, on textual analysis, and on the meaning of comparison and contrast--have them dittoed, and circulate them to the faculty. You need not overwhelm your faculty with a huge stack of such handouts. Keep them short, send only one at a time, and explain that you thought the faculty might be interested in knowing what you are doing to help their students.

Circulating logs and handouts helps you tell the faculty that you are concerned with matters other than mechanical errors in a way that is not threatening to them. Rather than arguing, "Listen, you ignoramus, I am not a grammar school teacher," you are saying,"You and I have the same concerns. We are working together to help the student, and to make your job easier and more satisfying."

Perhaps the best way to lift the veil of secrecy from your function is to work with students on matters pertaining to writing in the presence of the faculty. Many of you offer a course on the research paper. We have such a course at the advanced level. It is intended to prepare students to write their theses, but it is not an hermetically-sealed course on research; rather it brings students together with the composition advisers, other students preparing to write a thesis, and the faculty who advise their theses. Every student is required to circulate a prospectus to the seminar and then

present it at a session to which his or her faculty adviser is invited. The discussions of the proposed projects are wide-ranging and stimulating. At the end of each session, the composition adviser takes the time to comment on the prospectus in a way which does not divorce the criticism from a discussion of the ideas presented.

Such criticism--which involves diagnosis of central problems and recommendations for improvement--alerts the faculty member directing the thesis to the function of the composition adviser. Many are genuinely surprised at the role a composition specialist can play in helping students understand how to present complex ideas. "You are just like a surgeon," one commented to me after a seminar. "You focus on the overriding problem, and then show how it can be corrected. You're so precise. I wish I could do that."

This kind of demonstration opens channels of communication between composition specialists and faculty. Scientists begin to discuss how much they hate the prose of the sciences, prose their students imitate. And they explain that while they wish their own students wrote better, they themselves adopt the goobledygook because they are afraid their articles will not be published otherwise.

Finding such opportunities to demonstrate what you do when you work with students is obviously important to you if you want to implement a writing-across-the-curriculum program. They give you a chance to show the faculty what you do, and they have a chance--perhaps for the first time in their professional careers--to discuss their concerns about discourse, both in terms of their students and in terms

of their own profession.

Describing and demonstrating what you do helps lift the veil of secrecy from your function. You are able to identify yourself as one whose interests do not differ significantly from other faculty. Equally important to identifying yourself are your efforts to signal every way you can that you are a professional in a recognized field. Read everything you can lay hands on about writing-across-the-curriculum programs in other parts of the country, and use every opportunity to indicate that you are familiar with research on developing writing abilities, discourse analysis, and other aspects of rhetoric and composition pedagogy. We are doubly strangers to our colleagues. They neither know our function, nor that we, too, identify our work as part of a professional field of study.

Advice and Consent: Inviting the Handshake

If faculty think you are trying to shove something down their throats, the troop will close ranks. You will never get into their tree. And rightly so. Any writing-across-the-curriculum program should reflect the concerns of the particular institution. There is no "ideal" program; rather, each is tailored to the needs of the faculty who will implement it.

One effective way to indicate your serious intention to solicit advice is to become involved in establishing a faculty advisory committee on writing in the curriculum. Faculty love to advise, and once such a committee is formed, it naturally will have to learn more about the subject upon which it convenes. This gives the composition faculty

an automatic and supportive role.

These then are the recommendations which might be useful to those seeking to implement writing-across-the-curriculum programs: survey your faculty, legitimize your ideas by using outside consultants, lift the veil of secrecy surrounding your function, and seek advice from the faculty. One final thing I would remind you to do. Define for yourself exactly how many faculty you wish to enlist initially. If you start with a vague notion that you want to be offered a handshake by every faculty member from every troop, you will be very discouraged. When a strange macaque enters a new troop, only one of the troop's macaques offers the initial handshake. That is enough to get the stranger invited to join.

I wish you luck as you enter the strange land. It might help you to know that this academic year, we are offering a faculty workshop to ten faculty, using two outside consultants from the Pacific Northwest Writing Consortium. Workshop participants will serve on a committee to advise us on curriculum revision. Our period of sitting and scratching--we set these goals in 1979--is nearing an end. If you want to be a vine swinger, I suggest that patience is an essential virtue.

Linda R. Robertson
Honors College
University of Oregon